

Universal toleration

2nd quote / Herbert Marcuse

Repressive tolerance. The title of Herbert Marcuse's essay is immediately provocative for the reader: How could something so morally right and politically progressive be named repressive? It seems counterintuitive at first. In this essay will first provide some background-context for the quote. And then I will present supporting arguments for Marcuse's critique of universal tolerance, try to explain the rationale behind his way of theorizing tolerance. Finally, I will use his philosophy as a stepping stone for commentating on contemporary issues in political philosophy.

The timing of Marcuse's writing is interesting in itself, he was a thinker engaging with Marxist and Freudian concepts in post-war USA: the black civil rights movement was just beginning to catalyze itself, worker's unions were still strong in the US but the turmoil of '68 and the second wave of feminism was still ahead. We must also note that he was coming from the traditions of the Frankfurt School and he came as a political refugee to the US. So first let's ask ourselves why the originally liberal concept of tolerance, stemming from the thinkers of the Enlightenment, is interesting to an explicitly Marxist thinker? I believe it is because he could already foresee tolerance slowly becoming part of mainstream ideological trends. As the once progressive notion was being co-opted by those who preferred the status quo (of capitalism, of oppression based on race \ sex) criticism of universal tolerance was needed.

So, is the critique of the repressive nature of universal toleration stems from the *universality* of the idea? I am sure some Subaltern thinkers, like Chakrabarty Spivak would argue that, as they refuse almost all notions of Western universality, but not Marcuse. He was comfortable with making universal claims about the needs of the people or the exploitive nature of capitalism. Still, tolerance in his view was not the right principal to follow for progressive ideologues and politicians alike.

The easiest way to understand the problematic side of tolerance is the way we use the word in our daily lives, in our language-games so to speak. We express ourselves through the verb tolerate when we describe things that are in fact uncomfortable to us but we still decide not to engage with the source of our uncomfortableness. We can tolerate cold temperature in a room or a loud group of people on a bus. The situation might be uncomfortable but not insufferable enough so that we act upon our feelings. It might be that we do not act because it seems impolite or because we deem the effort to change the thing that's bothering us too big or – and maybe this is the most interesting here – because we are subjugated to the person / institution that could initiate the change. My point is that toleration in our personal lives is all too often a mere absence of action, 'suffering in silence' if you like. I am not trying to suggest that we should stop being tolerant in this sense, it is in fact a useful attitude to prevent many personal conflicts and so on. All I am asking, by following Marcuse's lead, is: can a notion used to describe such a negative and passive emotion and attitude be fit for progressive politics? What may happen if we preach the word tolerance universally? What or whom could be repressed?

I think the afore-described usage of tolerance lays the foundations for its political role but it does not explain it all. Tolerance as a political notion, was in the 20th century and still, is a popular term. Without question it is a better principle to follow than its opposing terms, discrimination or simply intolerance. However, aren't there any competing progressive notions? I would like to suggest that liberation and emancipation are one of those. Liberation is clearly referring to a progressive agenda but it is a lot less frequently used, not nearly as popular as tolerance. By contrasting liberation and tolerance as political terms I'll try to explain a little more what I meant in the introduction by tolerance becoming supportive of the status quo.

In politics and in left-wing political philosophy liberation is used to describe the (total) negation of the current order. Liberation entails all members of society, it is, in essence, a universal idea. It usually refers to a disagreement with the material inequalities in place, it is used in the Marxist sense to refer to the theory and practice (=praxis) of challenging injustices. Therefore it is a radical notion and a catalyzing notion. (Radical in the sense that it refuses all aspects of capitalist social hierarchy, not in the sense of political extremism.) Liberation was an important term for several repressed social groups. It is what second-wave feminists like Germaine Greer - who even a few years ago said that she never liked the more easily neutralized name feminism compared to the radical name Women's Liberation Movement -, put on their flags to express their intent to reject the patriarchal organization of society as a whole. In parallel, it became an important notion for the lesbian and gay activists of the 60's and 70's too. These were strong movements, next to the Worker's and the Black Civil Rights Movements, they were very successful movements. They really did challenge the attitudes of the general population and the organization of the state, of national economics but of the wider society too. After their successes many conservative truths were no longer believable nor plausible. But their struggle threatened too much the interest of capitalists whom after the first big crises after World War II - the oil-crisis in the mid 70's - really had to figure out new ways to rule the people. Reactionism was in due time. Of course new material measures were introduced like the dismantling of unions in the UK led by Margaret Thatcher, but what is really interesting here from a philosophical perspective is that Marcuse foresee much of the cultural phenomena we are experiencing in late-capitalist - primarily Western - societies today. And to this I will get back to shortly.

Tolerance, in contrast to liberation refers to a much more compromise-based set of notions. The passivity that is inherent in the usage of toleration is of course useful sometimes in political thinking too. For example, it is important to stop people from engaging in discriminative actions towards their Black, Jewish or Roma, etc... neighbors. However, only indirectly but the problematic nature of political tolerance immediately comes up in two ways here. I cannot unfold these in total due to the limits of this essay, but it is important to note them. The first question is whether it is enough to be passive/non-active towards minorities that have been previously discriminated against or we need something more (e.g. affirmative action, integration). The second question is more profound, thus more important and difficult to answer. Can we speak of tolerance without reinforcing ideas of difference, without reproducing the socially subjugated Other(s)?

Tolerance at its best is targeted towards a marginalized group of people to improve their status as citizens. Therefore tolerance *can* be a way to achieve recognition a la Axel Honneth. But at its worst it is promoted to people as a general attitude, as the ultimate answer to all social issues. Which is worrying if we recognize that not all aspects of injustices are based on the misrecognition of identities. In arguing with Honneth Nancy Fraser highlights the injustices of redistribution in order to explain that there are issues which cannot be answered by tolerance. The discrimination of gays and lesbians for instance might come close to an end by reaching a point where no personal prejudices are present in society, however no matter how unbiased we all might be towards the poor, the sub-proletariat their oppression due to its material origins will not cease to be. Consequently Fraser calls for a framework that can work both in the case of injustices of recognition, in injustices of redistribution, but as most injustices are complex it is most important to have an agenda to address intersections of the two. I believe that in realm of words and abstract notion this framework that encompasses the engagement to dismantling injustices universally was (and still is) liberation.

At this point it might make sense if I go as far as to say that promoting universal and absolute tolerance is in the interest of some. In the excerpt from Marcuse I would identify them as the masters. Those on the top of social hierarchies prefer social movements, thinkers, NGOs or simply any individual citizen to be preoccupied with injustices of recognitions and the need for tolerance. A clear and simple illustration of that is when undoubtedly exploitive fashion companies print slogans promoting social justice on their clothes. Since the public sphere and the space for debates and the representation of interests is not endless, stressing the importance of recognition and tolerance will result in less interest and engagement with injustices of redistribution. We shall see that over-stressing differences of identity in modern discourses may easily result in helping the 'masters' rule by the Ancient Roman law of 'rule and divide'.

As I mentioned briefly before, recognition seems to entail the existence and maybe the reproduction of the Other(s). Which, by itself is not an issue in all cases. If we did not realize through the work of Simone de Beauvoir that women as a social group were / are an Other within Western culture then the whole question of women's subjugation could not have been addressed so well. Even Marcuse himself wrote a book, called *One-dimensional Man*, on the need of constructing the negating cultural field of the commercialized mainstream. And later he gave lectures where he identified such emancipatory potential in feminist and ecological movements. From the excerpt too it is clear that he rejected (cultural, political) heteronomy. However, again by following Marcuse's lead, we shall note that universality does not necessarily mean heteronomy. Just as liberation, even though it is universalistic – if we accept the original definition of Karl Marx - simply means the real possibility of every individual to live their lives according to their particular needs and to the best of their personal abilities.

I believe that my conclusion to this topic will not be surprising to the reader. By unfolding some implicit notion of the Marcuse quote I tried to show the relevance of him as a dialectic materialist thinker. More generally I wanted to stress the importance of such provocative intellectual endeavors as the essay *Repressive Tolerance* since as I see it proactive criticism is very much necessary in today's global political climate. I hope that I could also show that it is

always more important to challenge the notions propagated by those in positions of power – let them be individuals, political parties or institutions, etc. – since their interests are inherently connected to upholding the status quo.